

BARON DEKALB, THE SECRET AGENT OF FRANCE WHO BECAME A MAJOR GENERAL OF THE AMERICAN ARMY



THE BARON
DE KALB

Citizen of the World and International Spy Who Did More Than Any One Else to Secure the Recognition and Aid of France in the War for Independence, and Who Died Fighting for the American Cause.

BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

To Baron De Kalb, the soldier of fortune, international spy and major-general of the patriot army in the War for Independence, was due, more than to any other individual, the alliance which the struggling colonies made with France when their fate hung in the balance. It was the Prime Minister of Louis XV, who conceived the plan which De Kalb carried out. But it was De Kalb's persistence which kept the plot alive and made it bear fruit more than ten years later, when another King and another Prime Minister ruled the destiny of France.

The Treaty of Paris, signed by England and France in 1763, consummated the ruin of the French colonies and the overthrow of France as a sea power. By the possession of Canada, the English had carried this conquest from the Gulf of Mexico to the Polar seas and had become the most powerful nation in the world. France, on the other hand, was prostrate. Louis XV, was ruled by Mme. de Pompadour, vain, selfish and capricious. Never before or since was the hereditary hatred of the French for the English greater than at that period. Yet France's treasury was dry and she did not dare to embark upon another struggle with her ancient enemy.

The Duc de Choiseul was Prime Minister. He was a past master of all the devious ways of diplomacy. His secret agents were in every court of Europe. He had brought the business of espionage to a science. Through his international spies he knew better than the English themselves of the spirit of unrest that pervaded the American colonies. He decided to send some one across the seas to learn at first hand of the conditions that existed there. If these were such as he hoped, he planned secretly at first and then openly to foment a revolution in America and thus to wound England in her most vital part. The last chapter of the great plot, whose fulfillment might take years, was for France to attack England when a large portion of her army and navy had been drawn to the other side of the Atlantic to quell the colonial revolt.

His First Journey to America. De Kalb at that time was perhaps thirty years old. It is not known exactly where he was born, or when. Probably it was in the Province of Alsace, which was then a part of France. Whether he inherited the title of baron or whether he won it with his sword is equally obscure. Some say he was a peasant's son. He was a soldier of fortune from the time he was old enough to bear arms. He fought in the Seven Years' War, and at some time in that period became

a secret agent of the French Government. He spoke many languages with extraordinary facility. He was a trained soldier and had a genius for obtaining difficult information. He must have been especially amenable in his line of work in order to be picked out by the astute Prime Minister of France.

De Kalb was a lieutenant-colonel of infantry in the French army in August, 1767, when he received secret instructions from the Duc de Choiseul to proceed immediately to Amsterdam and learn everything he could regarding the English colonies. If the rumors appeared to him to be well founded he was instructed to proceed to America and to continue his investigations there.

"You are to assure yourself of the determination of the American colonies to throw off the English yoke," read the secret instructions. "You are to carefully examine the resources that they have in troops, fortifications and supplies of munitions of war and of food, both present and prospective. You are to obtain the confidence of those at the head of the movement and learn all details as to their plans, and to secure the names of those who will command a revolt when one occurs."

Supplied with passports and a considerable sum of money, De Kalb went to Holland in the first days of June and spent the next few weeks questing information in every maritime city of that country. He sifted the mass of rumors and weighed one bundle of alleged facts against another. The brief report he made to the Prime Minister gives the substance of the most credible, although conflicting bits of information that he picked up and closed by stating that it is useless for him to remain longer in Holland, and that it will be necessary for him to proceed to America to accomplish his mission. The Duc de Choiseul agreed with him in this, and the burden of his final instructions was to take the utmost precautions against the nature of his mission being discovered. De Kalb informed the minister that he would transmit his reports in cipher in his letters to Mme. De Kalb in France. She had the key to this cipher and would translate and forward these reports to the Prime Minister.

De Kalb landed in Philadelphia, and after spending some time there, reached New York in February, 1768. Thence he traveled in New England and Canada. All through the concise and coldly accurate reports that De Kalb sent to the French Prime Minister there runs an ever deepening and ever broadening vein of enthusiastic sympathy for the American col-

onists. In those days each colony was independent and jealous of the others, but De Kalb predicted that it would not be long before they would be drawn together by their common wrongs and unite in a struggle for independence. He expressed surprise at the ardor of their devotion to the cause of liberty, and emphasized the importance of the movement that was becoming widespread throughout the colonies. He told how the inhabitants were depriving themselves of all superfluous things and living absolutely upon those that they were able to produce themselves, thus reducing their commerce with England to the vanishing point.

What He Thought of the Colonies. "It is estimated that the present population of the colonies is 2,000,000, but I am convinced that this number should double within thirty years," wrote De Kalb from New York. "The towns are veritable ant hills, and there are infants everywhere. The people are robust and enterprising. There is here the germ of a mighty nation in the years to come. The colonists are persuaded of the justice of their cause and confident of their ability to achieve their independence if the future conduct of the mother country renders it necessary for them to break the bonds that bind them to her."

De Kalb did not intrude to his correspondence with the Prime Minister the names of the prominent Americans with whom he talked. In one of his letters he says that he fears his letters are being tampered with and that he deems it best to reserve such details until his return to France. It is evident, however, that he obtained the confidence of most of the men who afterwards became leaders in the patriot cause. When he returned to

Europe he pointed out to the Prime Minister two conclusions in particular that were the results of his long and careful investigations. One was that despite the oppression of Great Britain there was a deep and ardent affection on the part of the colonies for the mother country—an affection equalled only by their instinctive antipathy to France. This, he said, would make it undesirable for France to aid openly or by any except the most secret means toward bringing about a rupture between America and England. His second conclusion was that the break between Great Britain and her American colonies was inevitable, although it might not occur for eight or ten years. When it did come he was confident that the colonies would attain their independence. These opinions did not coincide with those which the Duc de Choiseul had formed. The Duc de Choiseul needed something to bolster his tottering power as Prime Minister and was eager to carry out to the full his plan of embroiling and conquering England. Therefore he treated De Kalb coldly, paid him off in money and made him a brigadier—a comparatively empty title, for the pay of the army was in arrears. Not long after that the Duc de Choiseul lost the favor of the King and was sent into exile.

His Influence Over Lafayette. The Declaration of Independence came sooner than De Kalb had expected. Throughout the years that intervened between his visit to America and the outbreak of the Revolution De Kalb became more and more imbued with the spirit of the idea for which the Americans were struggling. He set himself to lay down their lives. He let no opportunity pass to renew his former friendship with such prominent Americans as visited France. Among these were Silas Deane and De Kalb, who was chosen as the first delegate to the new Republic to the Court of Versailles. Louis XVI was then King. Almost the first thing that Deane did after his arrival in Paris was to appoint De Kalb as his principal agent. They were constantly together, and De Kalb set about recruiting officers and preparing for a secret expedition to aid the Americans. De Kalb was the moving spirit—the power behind all this.

One day the Duc de Broglie sent for De Kalb and urged him to persuade the Marquis de Lafayette to join this little band of adventurers. De Kalb realized instantly the advantage to American cause of the alliance of this young nobleman. Lafayette was related to some of the highest dignitaries of the French court, and was one of the leaders of French society. These qualifications outweighed the fact that he was no soldier. By this time De Kalb had given his heart and soul to the cause of the Americans. He offered every document to Lafayette—military glory, fame, everything he thought would appeal to the young noble. So as to give prestige to the expedition, he made Lafayette its nominal head. In this way he attracted a crowd of brilliant Frenchmen trained in arms and paved the way for the recognition by France of a new republic.

Lafayette was not particularly anxious to go on this expedition. He had much to lose and little to gain. The Duc de Broglie, however, desired him to take part in it, while others equally prominent urged him against it. Each side had its selfish motives. Lafayette was but a pawn in the mighty game. It required the united effort of Deane, De Kalb and Lafayette to overcome all the difficulties in the way and to get Lafayette started at last. Finally on the 26th of March, 1777, De Kalb and Lafayette sailed from Bordeaux. They might never have reached America had it not been for De Kalb. He learned that the French King had sent orders to the Windward Islands, where the vessel was to stop, to arrest Lafayette and De Kalb and bring them back. De Kalb "persuaded" the captain to pursue a direct route to America, and after seven weeks' voyage they landed at Georgetown, in the Carolinas.

On their arrival, which was expected, they went through the formality of offering their service to the American cause. Congress, in a shrewdly worded resolution, made Lafayette a major-general, "owing to his rank and services in the French army, which in itself was of

fluence." De Kalb also received a major-general's commission, but his services in the past and his practical value as a soldier were so well known that it was deemed unnecessary to give any excuse for his appointment. The other Frenchmen who composed this party of adventurers did not fare so well. Those who seemed capable and sincere were admitted to the Continental Army. The services of the rest were refused, and they returned full of hatred to their own land. De Kalb was placed in command of the army in the north under Lafayette.

The Last Fight. It was not until two years later, in 1780, that he gained especial prominence, although he fought valiantly in many engagements. Things had been going badly for the Americans in the Southern colonies. Army after army had been defeated, detachments cut off, posts carried, and at length two States were reduced to another country, and the conquering army was ready to invade a third. De Kalb and his forces were sent to North Carolina, where they were to be joined by the army under General Gates. Cornwallis opposed them. On the 16th of August, the battle of Camden was fought. Major-General Baron De Kalb commanded the right wing, while Gates as general-in-chief, superintending the whole, placed himself on the road between the line of battle and the reserves. The left flank, under Stevens, was routed in the ensuing combat and fled in disorder. Only De Kalb and his veterans held the battle on the right in suspense. They were completely outnumbered. The conflict was as desperate as that ever fought on any battlefield. So close did the enemy press that it was a hand-to-hand struggle. There was nothing but the crash of clubbed muskets and the thrust of cold steel. Like an ancient warrior De Kalb raged ever in the forefront of the battle. He was seen to engage in a score of hand-to-hand combats before he fell mortally wounded. He was a man of great stature and amazing strength, all his life a soldier. It is no wonder therefore that in each of these individual struggles he came off victor and was only subdued when a concerted charge was made upon him by a little band of redcoats. These bore him to earth and would have pinned him there with their bayonets had not his aid-de-camp saved him from immediate death when he fell by embracing his prostrate body and receiving the bayonet thrusts that were pointed at his friend and comrade.

The Americans rallied for an instant and bore their dying General with them as they retreated from the field. He died three days later, and is buried, as he always wished to be, on the battlefield that was his last. Years later Congress caused a monument to be erected to mark the spot. The inscription on his monument says that he died in the forty-eighth year of his age. It is more probable that he was nearly seventy. But such had been the temperance of his life that he not only enjoyed the most superb health to the very last, but his countenance still retained all the freshness and fullness of youth.

So ended the career of this great soldier of fortune. Almost to the last he continued to write out in cipher the numerous reports, whose destination no one knew. Undoubtedly he continued until his death as one of the chief confidants of the French Government in the United States. No man was better qualified. He was sober, drinking water only; abstemious to excess; living on bread, sometimes with beef soup, at other times with cold beef. He was untiring in his industry. It was his constant habit to rise at 5 in the morning, light his candle and devote himself to writing. Every moment that he could snatch from his military duties found him covering paper with curious hieroglyphics. These sheets of paper were not loose, as is customary in camps. These volumes were transmitted to the Baron's unknown correspondent whenever a safe opportunity might offer. No one knew whether they were sent. De Kalb betrayed an unceasing jealousy lest his journals and mystic dictionary might be perused. He seemed always to be very much in dread of losing his rank and having his services of

no value, and never failed to direct his quartermaster to place him as near the center of the army as was allowable, having an utter aversion to being in the vicinity of either flank lest an adventurous partisan might carry off his precious documents. What became of his journals is not known, but very probably he did not take them into South Carolina. It is more likely that he placed such as remained in the hands of the French Minister for transmission to Paris when he was ordered south. Doubtless to-day they are in

the huge national archives in France, covered with dust and forgotten. (Copyright, 1910, by Richard Spillane.)

Fredericks Hall Social News.

(Special to The Times-Dispatch.) Fredericks Hall, Va., August 20.—Mrs. Mattie Backham and children have returned to Norfolk after spending several weeks with relatives here. Mrs. David Goodwin, of Mississippi; Mrs. Anna Watts and Miss Watts, of Rockbridge county, are the guests of Miss Burch Goodwin. Mr. and Mrs. C. D. Hardenbergh, of Richmond, have been the recent guests of the former's parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. V. Hardenbergh. N. C. Harris, of Johnson City, Tenn., spent several days with his mother last week. J. S. Moore has returned from a trip to Richmond.

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